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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 NAIROBI 001023

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TAGS: PHUM KDEM PGOV PREL ASEC KE

SUBJECT: PUBLIC AND POLITICIANS DEMAND EXPLANATION FOR
MEDIA CRACKDOWN

REF: NAIROBI 988

Classified By: D/PolCouns L. Peterson. Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: As the furor over the government's assault on media freedom grew into a several thousand strong protest march, further details of the raid against the Standard Media Group suggest it was part of a much deeper effort to help the increasingly paranoid government cling to power. Although there is still no response from President Kibaki, one MFA official has begun to understand the broader implications of the media arrests and raids, concerned the crackdown will harm Kenya's credibility on human rights at the UN. END SUMMARY.

OPPOSITION RALLIES AROUND THE RAIDS

12. (C) Nearly a week after the incident, public outrage over the March 2 police raid on the Standard Media Group will not go away. The opposition Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) led a 5,000 strong demonstration through downtown Nairobi March 17. The group, led primarily by Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) members of parliament, presented a letter to Information Minister Mutahi Kagwe, proceeded to the office of Internal Security Minister (and mastermind of the raids) John Michuki calling for his resignation, and concluded with a rally at Uhuru Park at which MPs, including Raila Odinga and Kalonzo Musyoka, demanded Michuki leave office. The morning of the march, organizer Reuben Ndolo (MP - Nairobi) told poloff the purpose of the exercise was twofold: to call Kenyans' attention to the government's wrongdoing, and to call on the government to respond. Ndolo complained that the government (Kibaki) refused to discuss the raids, adding that the protesters would demand an official apology.

WANTED: NEW POLICE COMMISSIONER

13. (C) While Kibaki remained stubbornly silent, Police Commissioner Hussein Ali visited the President at State House hours after returning from the Seychelles March 6 - a bold move for an official who serves at the pleasure of the President. Ali reportedly protested that his command had been circumvented and he had had no knowledge of Michuki's plan. According to media reports, Ali also met with Criminal Investigation Division Director Joseph Kamau and Michuki, both of whom played a key role in planning and carrying out the police action behind Ali's back. Although Ali did not submit his resignation to Kibaki, it is rumored to be forthcoming. Having stepped over the company line, and without the support of his higher ups in the Internal Security Ministry, his position as Commissioner has likely become untenable.

FOUL PLAY RUNS DEEP

14. (S/NF) Although initially written off as the alarmist talk of a conspiracy theorist, opposition MP and ODM leader Odinga's claims of "Russian mercenaries" hired to kill him (reftel) have begun to gain some credence. Stanley Murage, the President's strategic policy advisor, is rumored to have hired unsophisticated Russian thugs to cause chaos which the President, whose political viability is waning, can subsequently exploit to consolidate power. Observers further suggest that the "threatening information" Michuki alleges was contained in the Standard's hard drives may have related to the hired thugs. (NOTE: The Standard continues to deny that it possessed any such information. END NOTE.) With these new revelations, concern is growing among those outside of Kibaki's Kikuyu clique that silencing the Standard was an effort to keep the lid on an intricate network of graft. ODM leader Salim Lone told PolCouns the raid on the Standard was not a "one off," but rather was simply the latest in a string of efforts designed to contain whistleblowers.

IMPACT RESONATES...WITH SOME

15. (C) The broader implications of the March 2 police actions against the media are resonating with some sections of the Kenyan government. Head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' International Organizations and Conferences Division Tom Amolo expressed to poloff concern that the raids would reflect badly on Kenya's planned candidacy for a seat on the next UN human rights body. In light of A/S Jendayi Frazer's March 7 op-ed suggesting that Kenya is well-placed to lead Africa on accepting meaningful reform, Amolo, a diplomat who has served in Washington, asked what Kenya could do to "energize" the negotiations.

16. (C) COMMENT: Indications that there is an international criminal element woven into the highest levels of the Kenyan government, of which President Kibaki may or may not be aware (observers suggest not), lend a worrisome unpredictability to the current situation. While certainly not indicative of broader Government of Kenya appreciation for the gravity of the police actions against the media, Amolo's recognition of the possible ramifications is typical of our connections throughout government: many technocrats get it, but are limited by the actions of the politicians. Amolo's concern presents an opportunity for the U.S. to emphasize just how damaging the raids were to Kenya's democratic reputation. We plan, as well, to disseminate this message to those who do not yet recognize the ramifications of their actions. END COMMENT.
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